



Here, we see an individual standing at a crossroads with a thought bubble above his head. Inside the bubble are words like rejection, loneliness, anxiety, sadness, and anger. These are representations of emotions he could be feeling. Below him, the words “idle time” appear, showing how unstructured time can intensify these emotions.

It’s important to note that many people struggle to identify and name the emotions they’re experiencing. For men, societal norms often limit emotional awareness to just “**happy**,” or “**angry**.” And in religious contexts, anger is often frowned upon, leaving many men with a pile of unidentified emotions that feel overwhelming and heavy.

To the left of this individual, there’s a door labeled “**Relief**.” The options behind this door can be remembered with the acronym **DOTS**:

- **D** stands for **Distraction**—things like video games, pornography, masturbation, television, or excessive reading.
- **O** stands for **Opting Out**—avoiding situations or responsibilities, like quitting dating due to anxiety.
- **T** stands for **Thinking**—overanalyzing problems or internalizing blame, which provides temporary relief but no resolution.
- **S** stands for **Substances**—turning to alcohol, drugs like marijuana.

While all of these do provide temporary relief, they lead the individual into a room where a dangerous cycle ensues.

Now, let's explore this room. Inside, we find words like **Dwell, Rituals, Justify, Giving In, Regret,** and **Shame**. This is what we call the "**Shame Cycle**," where the person begins to be acted upon by their choices.

First, they dwell on their actions, on the distraction, opting out, thinking (overanalyzing), or substance use. Next, they perform rituals unique to their habits. Then, they begin to justify their behavior, saying things like, "*It's not that bad, I deserve this, this will be the last time, or I'll feel better and be able to focus after.*" Eventually, they give in and feel immediate regret. That regret spirals into shame, trapping them in a repeating cycle.

This cycle is like quicksand. Struggling and panicking only make it worse. However, there is an exit sign. Escaping the cycle requires effort but is entirely possible.

To escape, a suggested acronym is ACE:

- **A** stands for **Acknowledge**—recognizing you're in the room.
- **C** stands for **Connect**—looking around your environment and engaging with it. Find what's useful and grounding.
- **E** stands for **Engage**—actively using the tools around you to pull yourself out of the shame cycle.

Many addiction recovery programs focus solely on warning people about the dangers of this room, emphasizing how harmful it is to enter. But in reality, most people find themselves in this room unintentionally, simply because they're grappling with emotions they don't fully understand.

The real focus needs to shift toward helping individuals process their emotions in healthy ways, before they seek relief in unhealthy patterns.

To the right of the individual, there's a set of stairs. The stairs represent effort and work, and written on the stairs are the words **Act** and **Values**. These stairs symbolize deliberate actions we take to align with our values, actions that require ongoing effort but lead to meaningful progress in life.

Deliberate actions might include things like socializing, creating, studying, exercising, pursuing hobbies, planning, building, designing, relaxing, or having fun. These activities are tied to values such as self-love, humility, learning, and contributing to society. For example, when you learn to love yourself, you can extend that love to others and make a positive impact.

The stairs remind us that while these actions take effort, they are vital because they connect us to our values and help us grow. **This is a key distinction:** many addiction recovery programs have historically encouraged activities like exercising or reading scriptures as a way to distract them from temptations or uncomfortable feelings. But distraction can actually lead back into the “room” we described earlier, because it’s not addressing the core issue, it’s just temporary relief.

Instead, we need to exercise or study the scriptures for the right reasons, for our health, for personal growth, or to deepen our connection to God, not as a way to avoid emotions or mistakes. When we act deliberately toward our values, these actions become part of building a life aligned with our beliefs and goals.

Ultimately, the key to overcoming challenges like excessive social media use, video games, pornography, or even feelings of depression and anxiety, is to stop seeking relief and start focusing on value-driven, deliberate actions. These actions keep us moving toward what truly matters to us.

The deeper lesson here is twofold: first, we need to learn to process and understand our emotions rather than suppress or distract from them. Second, we need a clear value system that gives us purpose and direction. When we connect to our values and take deliberate action, we can grow and thrive.

Let’s revisit the room and why people go into it. People enter the room of relief for various reasons: cutting, depression, anxiety, excessive video game use, and more. Interestingly, when someone comes out of the room and shares with us that they were there for these reasons, it’s often easier to show them love and understanding.

However, there’s a stark contrast when someone enters the room because of pornography use or masturbation. In our current church culture, there’s a significant stigma surrounding this issue. When someone admits to going into the room for pornography, they’re often met with scorn. A bishop might revoke their temple recommend, and a girlfriend might break up with them immediately. This stigma reinforces a narrative that anyone who views pornography must be addicted, creating harmful assumptions. It also teaches the individual to never tell anyone about the room, which worsens the situation.

It’s important to clarify while pornography addiction does exist and can destroy marriages, relationships, and even brain function, the vast majority of people who enter the room for pornography use are not addicted. They’re simply seeking relief from emotions they haven’t learned to process. For many, this behavior is a maladaptive coping mechanism they picked up early in life, boys more often than girls, though it’s not exclusively a male issue.

Addiction is an entirely different situation. Addiction consumes someone's life, it becomes their primary focus and dictates their decisions. Most individuals using pornography are not at that point. They're not addicted; they're overwhelmed by emotions they don't understand and are seeking temporary relief.

We need to change the narrative. If a young man admits, *"I went into the room, and I viewed pornography,"* and the response is, *"You're a pervert. You're a sex addict. Hand over your temple recommend. You don't deserve the priesthood. You shouldn't date anyone,"* we're doing immense harm. We're piling on regret and shame, throwing them deeper into the room, and making recovery far more difficult.

Instead, we should focus on this question: **What emotion are you feeling?** Let's examine that emotion. Let's learn to accept it, name it, and process it. By shifting the conversation from shame to understanding, we can help people make meaningful changes in their lives.

For example, a husband may come home from work and, instead of hugging his wife, he sits on the couch and starts scrolling through his phone. The wife might say, *"I feel like you don't like me,"* when in reality, she is feeling rejected. Misinterpreting the feeling leads to misinterpreting the thought, which then causes an incorrect action.

Males have described the room as though they're living two lives. When they're in the room, they don't understand why they're there, they hate being there, and they're overwhelmed by feelings of regret and shame. At the same time, there's this other part of them that knows what they value, or at least believes it does, and they tell themselves, *this isn't me. This isn't who I want to be. I've been raised better, and I know better.*

Ironically, this self-awareness often makes the regret and shame cycle worse. Living between the room and their values creates deep confusion. They start to dislike themselves, feeling lost because they're not taking deliberate actions to align with their values. Over time, this disconnect can lead to a point where they no longer know what they value at all. They stop liking themselves, struggle to identify what matters, and even begin to doubt if they have a value system at all.

This is a dangerous place for anyone to be. When someone gets to the point where they no longer care, they give up. That's why we need to take a different approach. As explained in the diagram, the first step is recognizing emotions. Don't throw them away or suppress them. Instead, accept the emotion, analyze it, and try to understand why you're feeling that way. Emotions, even uncomfortable ones, have something to teach us if we're willing to listen.

Emotions can be extremely difficult to process. One successful method for dealing with emotions is called Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), which focuses on helping

individuals embrace their emotions and thoughts rather than fighting or avoiding them. ACT emphasizes that pain and discomfort are inevitable parts of life. Instead of trying to suppress or run from emotions, ACT encourages you to allow them to exist without judgment. This is rooted in the idea that avoidance (entering the room) often worsens emotional distress in the long term.

For example, when you feel a difficult emotion, pause and name it, such as saying, “I am feeling sadness” or “I am feeling anger.” Acknowledge the emotion without labeling it as “good” or “bad”; it’s simply a natural human experience. Pay particular attention to your heart rate. ACT also teaches that our suffering often comes from how tightly we cling to negative thoughts. “Defusion” is the practice of separating yourself from your thoughts and observing them without getting entangled. Imagine your thoughts as clouds drifting in the sky or leaves floating on a stream, and use phrases like, “I am noticing the thought that...” rather than fully identifying with the thought. By focusing on the present moment, you can observe emotions as they arise without attaching to them or letting them overwhelm you.

Take deep breaths and ground yourself in the present using your senses, such as noticing five things you can see, hear, or feel around you, or use guided meditations to increase awareness of your emotions. ACT suggests that instead of letting emotions dictate your actions, you should act according to your core values. This means recognizing your emotions but not letting them control you. Reflect on what matters most to you, such as family, growth, or kindness, and when emotions arise, ask yourself, “What action aligns with my values in this moment?” Accepting emotions also involves treating yourself with kindness. It’s natural to feel fear, anger, or sadness, these emotions don’t make you weak or flawed. Speak to yourself as you would a friend, for example, “It’s okay to feel this way. You’re doing your best,” and practice self-care routines that help you process and release emotions, like journaling or talking to a trusted friend.

To recognize, accept, and work with emotions, ACT suggests cultivating mindfulness, separating from unhelpful thoughts, and leaning into discomfort without judgment. Through these practices, you can live a more meaningful life guided by your values, even in the presence of challenging emotions.

The second step is deliberate action. Even if you’re not entirely sure what your values are, you need to take positive, intentional steps toward building them. Actions like serving others, engaging in creative work, or learning something new help you uncover and solidify your values over time.

Ultimately, by accepting your emotions and taking deliberate actions, you can reconnect with yourself, rediscover your values, and break free from the regret and shame cycle.

Progress doesn't happen overnight, but with consistent effort, you can move toward the person you truly want to be.